

The right messaging should be the cornerstone of your research communications strategy



*Key to communicating your research successfully is having the right messaging. This will give you the best chance of capturing the attention of important stakeholders, while also ensuring all members of your research team are singing from the same song sheet. **Kevin Anselmo** offers some pointers on how to put together your message map; beginning with your overarching theme, building up your handful of jargon-free key messages, and supporting these with a mix of stories, data, metaphors, and eye-catching statements.*

You probably know that a house or building will come crumbling down if the cornerstone brick is not put in place correctly. Communicating research without laying the foundation of your messaging – the equivalent of the cornerstone – is a similarly risky proposition.

What is the one phrase that essentially captures the overall research agenda you want to be known for to a particular audience? Do you have this at the top of your mind? If you had a chance encounter with an important stakeholder – a policymaker or other key decision-maker – and had just two minutes to capture this individual's attention, would you be able to communicate a compelling story that would encourage that person to ask for a meeting or more information?

Messaging is all the more important – and difficult – when multiple individuals are involved with a particular project. Imagine the same stakeholder has ten chance encounters with ten different individuals, all from the same research team. Would all team members essentially be “singing from the same song sheet” about the importance of the research? There are various negative ramifications when research is communicated in a disjointed way.

Avoid this outcome by creating a message map that consists of the following:

- An overarching theme communicated in a single phrase.
- 3-5 key messages each communicated in a clear, jargon-free sentence.
- Proof points – stories, data, metaphors, statistics, and bold statements – that support the claims of these key messages. Stories can be particularly powerful. In a way, think about this like a politician delivering a major speech. Skilled political communicators will take a big picture issue and then personalise it by showing the individual who is in the audience, like a teacher, entrepreneur, or war veteran.

Consider this [institution-level message map](#) from the University of Missouri. You should always create a message map as part of your research communications, whether it relates to the macro (one's overall body of work), the micro (a specific project, such as a forthcoming book), or both. The following example is of what this looks like for an individual who is in the process of launching a new book on school bullying based on her research.

Key message

School administrators should deploy anti-bullying programmes that are integrated into school activities and enable the school to measure progress.

Proof points related to this key message

Story example #1

Consider the example of Anytown High School. As a result of adopting such a programme, there was a drastic reduction in bullying cases brought forth by students and parents.

Story example #2

Consider the story of a particular student who personifies the numerous young men and women whose lives are ruined by bullying. This person's life has been negatively impacted: the abuse suffered led to him dropping out of school and propelled a substance abuse issue that still hasn't been resolved.

Data/memorable statistics

Many school administrators don't realise school bullying is a problem. In fact, according to our survey, X per cent of school administrators don't think it is a problem in their school, while X per cent of students say they have been victimised by bullying. Programmes that incorporate education about bullying into all school activities have reported an X percent reduction in school bullying cases from one year to the next.

Metaphor

Imagine you are trying to lose weight. You need to check the scale to see if you are making progress. Unfortunately, many school administrators don't measure their progress in terms of reducing bullying incidents on campus. How can they know if progress is being made?

Bold statements

Our research shows that students' increased awareness about what bullying entails leads to a reduction in cases and higher graduation rates.

It is not necessary to have every type of proof point (story, data, metaphor, or bold statement) represented under each message. But you do want to think about having 3-5 crisp and compelling proof points to share for each key message. Once completed, analyse your key messages and proof points to identify the one overarching theme. This is that short phrase you want to be known for and that can serve as your hook to capture audiences.

Highlight this information – the overarching theme, key messages, and related proof points – on a one-page document. You could imagine putting the overarching theme at the top and maybe graphically illustrating this by marking a rectangle around this phrase. Each key message can be graphically represented to show its importance, and maybe the proof points are represented as bullet points.

Having this document will give you clarity about what to communicate to your different audiences, whether these are journalists, attendees at a conference, or colleagues at your institution, among others. If there are multiple individuals involved in the project, the messaging map allows you to communicate in unison. It is the song sheet you are handing to the choir so everyone is in rhythm and literally on the same page.

The message map also serves as a guide for ongoing communications activities. For example, the overarching theme can be the title of a new blog series and used in social media bios. The key messages could correlate to social media content that you are regularly disseminating, media pitches, email marketing campaigns, and talks at conferences.

You don't go on a job interview without preparing. Students should study before taking an exam. Ditto, you should take the time to articulate your messages if you want communications around your research to resonate with targeted audiences.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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About the author

Kevin Anselmo is the Founder of [Experiential Communications](#), a consultancy that helps academics and researchers communicate their work effectively. Learn more about his [Research Translation Writing Course](#).